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From Bread and Jam to Woolton Pie:
Food Rationing and Improved Nutrition in WWII Great Britain

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THIST 497: Senior Thesis

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Introduction

The practice of controlling food supplies has existed since ancient times—the Sumerians, the city-states of Greece and Rome, and ancient Egypt all implemented the regulation and enforcement of price and quality controls. Driven by urbanization and the resultant lack of ability by city-dwellers to farm and provide their own food, the controls were of a protective nature, as the commercialization of food production and retailing led to opportunities for graft and corruption. Less than honest merchants and growers engaged in such iniquities as “charging exorbitant prices, giving short weight, and reducing quality by adulteration.”¹ Throughout the history of Europe, authorities attempted to control these abuses with varying degrees of success; food historians John Burnett and Derek Oddy explain that controls were motivated by “a widely accepted belief in a ‘just price’ to the customer and a fair profit to the producer, that there existed a ‘moral economy’ which underlay commercial transactions and should, where necessary for the public good, supersede market forces.”²

In Great Britain in the eighteenth century, however, rapid industrialization and the work of scholars such as Adam Smith led to new economic and political approaches to governance; they argued “the public interests were best served by unfettered competition and the freedom of each individual to make the best bargains for himself.”³ As pleasing as this framework may have been to free trade advocates, its premise meant that market demands now superseded the public good. The resultant rampant malnutrition that afflicted Britain’s lower classes was effectively

¹ John Burnett and Derek J. Oddy, “Introduction.” Chap. 1, In *The Origins and Development of Food Policies in Europe*, edited by Burnett, John and Derek J. Oddy, (London: Leicester University Press, 1994) 3.

² Ibid., 2.

³ Ibid.

ignored—not one piece of food control legislation was passed during the entire nineteenth century—until the recruitment demands of the Boer War in 1899 exposed the truth about the working poor’s physical condition and sparked a national debate “focused on civilian health and fears of racial degeneration.”⁴ Despite these events, as well as advances in the sciences of nutrition and hygiene, food controls, which would be utilized by Parliament as a conduit to improved public health, would not be enacted until the twentieth-century, when military threats from Europe left Parliament no options but to impose food controls in the form of rationing.

The British government employed food rationing programs twice in the twentieth century: from 1918 to 1920, at the tail end of World War I, and again from 1940 until 1954, this time due to World War II.⁵ These programs, notably those implemented by Frederick James Marquis, Lord Woolton, during World War II, had far-reaching effects on the highly stratified class structure of British society as well as wartime morale, as new knowledge of human nutritional needs led to a more balanced diet for all and vastly improved the health of the nation.⁶

Historical Background

Political machinations and economic forces had influenced Britain’s foodways—the social and cultural dynamics of food—since ancient times, when the Romans introduced such innovative techniques as animal enclosures and cooking eggs with milk and honey, in what was

⁴ William H. Whitaker, “The State, Health, and Nutrition,” Chap. VII.1, In *The Cambridge World History of Food*, edited by Kiple, Kenneth F. and Kreimhild Conee Ornelas. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000,) 1579.

⁵ “On this Day,” BBC News, accessed November 16, 2013, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/4/newsid_3818000/3818563.stm

⁶ Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 207.

an early form of Britain's beloved custard.⁷ During the middle ages, Parliament passed legislation that controlled the price of pies, as well as establishing a minimum standard diet for the servants of noblemen, artisans and tradesmen; by the Elizabethan era, the massive importation of West Indian sugar so impacted the British diet that, amongst other repercussions, according to Spencer, "the wealthy all suffered from tooth decay."⁸

New farming technology in the eighteenth century vastly improved cereal yields, however, it was at the expense of the rural agricultural workers, who were effectively forced off their land by what eventually would be called the "Enclosure Acts." Wanting to expand, but unable to due to the existence of common lands, wealthy landowners, acting in conjunction with Parliament, began the process of "enclosure," that is, the transformation of the ancient communally-owned open fields into "privately owned, fenced-in fields that could be more intensively and profitably farmed by individual owners."⁹ These Acts drastically changed the lives of many, Spencer explains: "Rural life was radically altered and partially destroyed, and whole villages were abandoned. Within a generation, cooking skills and traditional recipes were lost forever."¹⁰ Many of the dispossessed migrated to the urban centers in search of employment.

⁷ Colin Spencer, "The British Isles." Chap. V.C. 4, In *The Cambridge World History of Food*, edited by Kiple, Kenneth F. and Kriemhild Coneè Ornelas. Vol. 2, 1217 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1220.

⁸ Ibid., 1221.

⁹ John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe: From the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 361.

¹⁰ Spencer, 1222.

Once there, these newly-created factory workers saw their diet decline from one composed primarily of cereals, wild vegetables, and game, to one of bread, jam, tea, and sugar.¹¹

By the nineteenth century, the diet of the poor had stretched to include highly nutritious potatoes, but it was still woefully deficient; however, these conditions did not prevent the population growth in industrial cities, as laborers continued to relocate and the Industrial Revolution facilitated the construction of factories that churned out consumer products, marketed at the emerging middle class. This era also saw the development of the commercial food industry, which began in 1809; Frenchman Nicolas Appert developed a hot water bottling method, which, with its airtight seals, came to be known as “appertization,” and it was this process of preserving food in sealed containers or bottles that proved to be the tipping point for the preserving revolution to come.¹²

Industrialists were quick to capitalize on this new process, producing all manner of preserved foodstuffs; Colquhoun describes tinned foods as “the tip of the iceberg in a veritable food revolution.”¹³ However, while the middle classes could afford such convenience foods as packaged biscuits, Australian tinned meat, commercially-prepared bread, and gelatin powders, the poor made do with cheaply made, adulterated foods. Concoctions such as margarine made from “chopped cows’ udders or suet emulsified with milk”¹⁴ and sweetened condensed milk

¹¹ Colin Spencer, *British Food: An Extraordinary Thousand Years of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 209.

¹² Rebecca Garcia and Jean Adrian. “Nicolas Appert: Inventor and Manufacturer.” *Food Reviews International*. Vol 25, no. 2 (April 2009): 117.

¹³ Kate Colquhoun, *Taste: The Story of Britain through its Cooking* (New York: Bloomsbury; Distributed to the trade by Holtzbrinck Publishers, 2007), 299.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 300.

were cheaply made and cheaply sold. Indeed, sweetened condensed milk was sold so much more cheaply than unadulterated milk that it became a regular substitute for many of the poor, even though it was severely lacking in nutritional value.¹⁵

However, despite the increased numbers of people living in poverty, and the obvious need for social reform and assistance, Parliament did little to help the plight of the factory workers; nonetheless, during recruitment for the Boer War in 1899, the government was forced to recognize that “38 percent of men were too physically unsound to fight, debilitated by a century of industrialization and by cheap, nutritionally inferior processed foods like margarine, condensed milk, and jam.”¹⁶ Many recruits were found to suffer from poor eyesight, hearing, and bad teeth as well as heart afflictions, a result of malnutrition during infancy.¹⁷

Further evidence of widespread malnourishment is seen in vital statistics: at the end of the nineteenth century, the average height for adult males in Britain was 5 feet 7 inches, and it was a mark of distinction for a man to be a “six-footer.” This can only be understood within the context of diet, Clarke explains, “since height is a clear long-term indicator of standards of nutrition.”¹⁸ Additionally, an investigation conducted by the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration concluded: “a third of all children were undernourished and that working-class boys of twelve were on average five inches shorter than those in private schools.”¹⁹

¹⁵ C. Anne Wilson, *Food and Drink in Britain: From the Stone Age to the 19th Century* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1991), 419.

¹⁶ Colquhoun, 311.

¹⁷ Spencer, *British Food*, 293.

¹⁸ Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-2000* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 41.

¹⁹ Colquhoun, 311-312.

At the dawn of the twentieth-century, social groups such as the Fabian Society and the rise of the New Liberals in Parliament brought attention to the many inequities that were rampant within British society; however, most activists focused their efforts on causes such as taxes and employment, and therefore it would not be until the outbreak of World War I that the British government would take an active role in controlling the food supply. That is not to say that food policy was completely off the government's radar, however; indeed, in 1905 a Royal Commission was convened once the government realized that "with a high amount of imported foods the British Isles would be especially vulnerable in times of war."²⁰ Despite this awareness, however, food policy was not to be a preeminent political issue until the onset of World War I, when food shortages and skyrocketing prices demanded government intervention.

World War I

When World War I began in 1914, Britain depended heavily on imported goods such as wheat from America and Canada to feed its citizens; indeed, nearly half of the country's total imports were foodstuffs.²¹ However, due to the deliberate inattention given to the issue of food controls by the Liberal government (who espoused a free trade economic philosophy,) the market regulation occurred in an "*ad hoc* manner," with five separate committees meeting in 1915 to discuss similar topics.²² It was this obvious need for centralized control as well as fears that German U-boats would disrupt Britain's food supply that led to the creation of the Ministry of

²⁰ Spencer, *British Food*, 301.

²¹ Clarke, 10.

²² Derek J. Oddy, *From Plain Fare to Fusion Food: British Diet from the 1890s to the 1990s* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2003), 71.

Food (MoF). The MoF was assembled in 1916 as part of the Board of Trade, notably after the election in December of Prime Minister David Lloyd George.²³



Figure 1. PM David Lloyd George
Source: liberalhistory.org.uk

Lloyd George, a former MP best known for his 1909 “People’s Budget,” advocated income redistribution in the form of an economic package aimed at “shifting the tax pressure from the working and middle classes to the upper class,” as well as introducing (and funding) major Liberal social reforms: old age pensions in 1908 and National Insurance in 1911.²⁴ A Welshman from a working class background, Lloyd George was known for his Liberal values as well as his non-conformism; he was also a skilled negotiator, successfully averting a national rail strike in 1907 during his tenure as the president of the Board of Trade. As Minister for Munitions in 1915, Lloyd George spearheaded the Munition Workers Committee, which advocated for the installation of canteens within factories; this happened, Spencer explains, because he “was deeply concerned that munition workers should have adequate nutrition.”²⁵

The link between the physical fitness of the worker and the output of the factory had been established; based on the Committee’s findings, factories installed canteens that provided breakfast, lunch, and tea with menu items such as chop and mashed potatoes, tripe and onions, and steak pie. For most factory workers, used as they were to a bland, carbohydrate-rich diet, the

²³ Clarke, 85.

²⁴ Chris Wrigley, “Biography of MP, 1st Earl Lloyd George of Dwyfor: David Lloyd George,” accessed March 2, 2014, http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/item_single.php?item_id=12&item=biography.

²⁵ Spencer, 301.

meals were “luxurious.”²⁶ However, due to various economic and political factors, after the Armistice in 1918, most factories closed their canteens; this occurred despite serving over one million meals a day, which effectively demonstrates the workers’ continued need for food controls.²⁷

Political struggles plagued the MoF in its early days; internal disagreements and growing anxiety around the food supply prompted Lloyd George to appoint sympathetic Lord Rhondda as Minister of Food in 1917, replacing the obstructionist Lord Devonport.²⁸ Without food controls, and with the war situation deteriorating, wealthy Britons stocked up on provisions, pushing prices higher, causing shortages and “fuel[ing] ill-feeling;” the situation was so dire that King George V issued a Royal Proclamation declaring the initiation of the ‘Eat Less Bread’ campaign, in which people were advised to eat slowly and only when they were “absolutely hungry.”²⁹ Despite these realities, there was still vocal opposition to the rationing plan; however, Lloyd George was resolute, proclaiming, “You must ration...I would certainly urge that there should be a very complete system of rationing...and everybody must be put on the same footing.”³⁰

Civilians generally accepted the program, welcoming the social equity it brought in the form of enhanced nutrition; it also did away with food shortages and the horrific queues, which,

²⁶ Spencer, *British Food*, 301.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 303.

²⁸ Kevin Manton, “Sir William Beveridge, The British Government and Plans for Food Control in Time of War, c. 1916-1941,” *Contemporary British History* 23:3 (2009), 363.

²⁹ Colquhoun, 319.

³⁰ Terry Charman, “The Ministry of Food: Terry Charman explores Food Rationing in World War Two,” Culture24, <http://www.culture24.org.uk/history-and-heritage/war-and-conflict/world-war-two/art76114>.

according to Spencer, were “looked upon with horror.”³¹ The rationing system selected by the MoF was designed to be a “guarantee that the good would be provided on demand where it was wanted,”³² and to that end, issued individual ration books. People would then select the retailer of their choice, who in turn would collect ration tickets and forward them on to the local food office, who used the data to determine future supplies to each shop.³³ The program lasted for only two years, however, working-class women and children were better fed than they had been before the war, and, for the first time in the history of Great Britain, “there was food for all distributed fairly.”³⁴

Foodstuff	Dates of Rationing	Weekly Allotment
Bacon	April—July, 1918	4 oz
Butcher Meat (raw)	April, 1918—December, 1919	1s.3d
Butter	July, 1918—May 1920	2 oz
Jam	November, 1918—April, 1919	4 oz
Lard	July—December, 1918	4 oz
Margarine	July, 1918—February, 1919	2 oz
Sugar	December, 1917—November, 1920	8 oz
Tea	July—December, 1918	2 oz

Figure 2. Foodstuffs rationed during WWI. Source: Spencer, *British Food*, 302.

Inter-War Years

After rationing ended in 1920, the MoF was shifted to the Board of Trade, where it was known simply as the “Board of Trade Food Department;” it was renamed once again in 1937 to

³¹ Spencer, 302.

³² Manton, 367.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

“Food (Defence Plans) Department,” and its stated purpose was to “formulate plans for the procurement, control and distribution of food during a major war.”³⁵ This department, which would become the Ministry of Food again with yet another name change in 1939 after the onset



Figure 3. Sir William Beveridge
Source: liberalhistory.org.uk

of war, was to become an integral part of the war effort. Its leading bureaucrat, Sir William Beveridge, was not shy about voicing his learned opinion, gleaned from his tenure at the first incarnation of the MoF during WWI; he knew that “food control had to be planned in advance and executed promptly,” and that “as rationing is embedded in the larger problem of food control so food control is embedded in larger problems of civilian mobilization.”³⁶

Beveridge clearly understood the link between morale and a well-fed population, and this comprehension would in no small way contribute to his defining work, the “Report of the Inter-departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services,” commonly known as the “Beveridge Report,” which he delivered to Parliament in 1942 and became the blueprint for the British welfare state.³⁷ The report proposed widespread reform to the existing welfare system, which was a hodgepodge of piece meal efforts of workmen’s compensation, social insurance and allied services; Beveridge’s plan identified a cohesive system that provided subsistence benefits for all, in exchange for a flat-rate weekly contribution. Beveridge was convinced that the timing was right for the adoption of such a

³⁵ Manton, 363.

³⁶ Ibid., 365.

³⁷ Mackay, 195.

system; indeed, in the report he states: “It may be possible, through a sense of national unity and readiness, to sacrifice personal interests to the common cause, to bring about changes which, when they are made, will be accepted on all hands as advances, but which might be difficult to make at other times.”³⁸

Despite Beveridge’s outspoken manner (or perhaps because of it) and his qualifications, he never held the post of Minister of Food; instead that honor fell to various political appointees. However, his defense plans were set in motion, one result of which was the creation of strategic reserves of sugar, wheat, and whale oil prior to 1939.³⁹

World War II

After war was declared in 1939, the Food (Defence Plans) Department was reinvented, once again, as the MoF, this time headed by William “Shakes” Morrison, a conservative Tory that some in the press had looked towards as a future Prime Minister.⁴⁰ Morrison, however, was unhappy about his “demotion” to the MoF from Agriculture, and, according to Manton, he “carried this attitude with him, and his weakness greatly colored the first period of the food ministry.”⁴¹ Despite this attitude, however, Morrison announced rationing plans in November of 1939, which unleashed a storm of protest in the press, as evidenced by this quotation from the *Daily Mail*:

³⁸ Sir William Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*. (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1942),

³⁹ Oddy, 134.

⁴⁰ Charman

⁴¹ Manton, 379.

Your butter is going to be rationed next month. It would be scarcely possible-even if Dr. Goebbels were asked to help-to devise a more harmful piece of propaganda for Great Britain. Our enemy's butter ration has just been increased from 3ozs to just under 4ozs. Perhaps because of Goering's phrase 'guns or butter' has given butter a symbolical significance. But mighty Britain, Mistress of the Seas, heart of a great Empire, proud of her wealth and resources? Her citizens are shortly to get just 4ozs of butter a week. There is no good reason to excuse Mr. Morrison, the Minister of Food, for this stupid decision.⁴²

Despite this over-the-top rhetoric, the general public embraced the plans, welcoming the equity it brought to the marketplace.⁴³ Many civilians believed that rationing would bring an end to what they saw as "profiteering" by shopkeepers, a holdover from the First World War. Indeed, the British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO) conducted a survey shortly after Morrison announced the rationing plans, and their data shows that "60% of those questioned thought that rationing was necessary, 28% were against it being introduced, while 12% said Don't Know."⁴⁴ Morrison's tenure as Minister of Food ended in April of 1940, shortly after the program was implemented; his replacement, Lord Woolton, was to have a decided impact on not only the reputation of the department, but also on the overall health of British citizens.⁴⁵

Lord Woolton, aka "Uncle Fred"

Various political appointees held the post of the Minister of Food during the twentieth century, but none captured the public's attention nor affected as much change as Frederick

⁴² Charman

⁴³ Norman Longmate, *How We Lived Then: A History of Everyday Life during the Second World War*, (London: Hutchinson of London, 1971), 152.

⁴⁴ Charman

⁴⁵ Longmate, 152.

Marquis, Lord Woolton, who headed the department from 1940 to 1943.⁴⁶ A recently ennobled, non-partisan businessman who had a “brilliant flair for improvising solutions,”⁴⁷ Woolton’s popularity soared due to his highly successful management of the rationing program as well as his personal charm; during an interview with the BBC, he won over the journalist, who reported on Lord Woolton’s graceful demeanor and attentiveness to detail; the journalist even went so far as to claim that “[...] if this is the type of man selected by the present Prime Minister Britain will surely be all right—at last.”⁴⁸ Additionally, according to Longmate, Woolton “restore[d] morale by visiting staff in their offices and by inviting the King to tour his headquarters, which raised



Figure 4. Lord Woolton
Source: Carrotmuseum.co.uk

the Ministry’s public standing.”⁴⁹ Woolton capitalized on his popularity, utilizing it with great effectiveness while promoting various MoF programs.

Indeed, the MoF “issued thousands of pieces of publicity in numerous different media in the hope of inspiring British consumers to act in a food-conscious manner.”⁵⁰ This extensive publicity campaign was designed to build a bond of trust between the MoF and the public; as

⁴⁶ E.R. Chamberlin, *Life in Wartime Britain*, edited by Quennell, Peter (London, Batsford, 1972,) 78.

⁴⁷ Manton, 363.

⁴⁸ Manton, 79.

⁴⁹ Norman Longmate, *How We Lived Then: A History of Everyday Life during the Second World War*, (London: Hutchinson of London, 1971), 140.

⁵⁰ Richard Farmer, “Food Fight: The Cinema of Consumption in Wartime Britain.” *United Academics Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 14 (2012): 27.

explained by Robert Boothby, Parliamentary Secretary to the MoF: “[my hope is] comradeship in matters of food—a sort of community of ‘food companions’ might grow.”⁵¹

The MoF’s Public Relations Division (PRD) placed regular magazine and newspaper advertisements, radio ads, and even created short cinema films. In 1940, working in conjunction with the BBC, the MoF launched *The Kitchen Front*, a five-minute radio program that was

broadcast nationally six mornings a week.⁵² According to Farmer, these broadcasts served multiple purposes: they were conducted in a “genial, light-hearted tone,” because Woolton believed that “the public was either going to laugh or cry about food rationing ... it was better for them that they should laugh—even if it was only somewhat a wry smile—than that they should contemplate too much on the misery of the position.”⁵³



Figure 5. Food Facts Advertisement
Source: highfields-arc.co.uk

Humor is a hallmark of Woolton’s tenure at the MoF: it is evident in many of the publicity materials and was intended to make the Ministry “seem both sympathetic and approachable.” People were encouraged to write in to the show, to send in recipes, cooking-related tips, or coping strategies. This method of outreach to the public was also successfully used with print

⁵¹ Ibid., 28.

⁵² Ibid., 29.

⁵³ Ibid.

advertisements; the “Food Facts” campaign ads were printed weekly in over a thousand separate publications, which was key to its success. Unlike the *Kitchen Front* radio program, “Food Facts” ads could be clipped out and saved for future reference, which contributed to its popularity.

Nutritional Aspects of Rationing

Woolton’s concern about the nation’s health led him to consult leading nutritionists of the day as part of the program development process; he truly believed that “it is my responsibility, to secure that so far as food is concerned, the nation is kept fit and well.”⁵⁴ Scotsman John Boyd Orr was one such scientist, and he warned the public, in 1940: “The health line of the Home Front may become as important as the Maginot Line.”⁵⁵ To that end, he developed what he called the “Iron Ration,” which “consisted of six foods only: bread, fats, oatmeal, potatoes, vegetables, and milk.” While this diet was ultimately discarded as it was found to be lacking “sufficient energy for most normal activity,” it was only the first attempt by Orr to quantify the British diet in terms of nutrients.⁵⁶ The publication of Orr’s *Food, Health and Income* in 1936 and B. Seebohm Rowntree’s *Poverty and Progress* in 1941 “pushed the issues of dietary standards and civilian health into the political forefront.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 207.

⁵⁵ Colin Spencer, *British Food: An Extraordinary Thousand Years of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 314.

⁵⁶ Oddy, 137.

⁵⁷ Carol F. Heltosky, “The State, Health, and Nutrition.” Chap. VII.1, In *The Cambridge World History of Food*, edited by Kiple, Kenneth F. and Kriemhild Coneè Ornelas (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 1583.

Lord Woolton made the nutritional content of food one of the hallmarks of his public relations campaign, and it is an issue investigated in “Rationing and Economic Constraints on Food Consumption in Britain since the Second World War,” written by Dorothy Hollingsworth in 1983. Hollingsworth presents data from the Ministry of Food, the League of Nations, and the British Medical Association in order to compare the trends in food consumption before the Second World War and after the end of food rationing in 1954. Her research reveals how, in the 1930s, an increase of interest in nutrition led to the formation of multiple food policies, aimed at



Figure 6. Woolton Pie Recipe.
Source: carrotmuseum.co.uk

combating malnutrition and increasing worker's earning capacity; programs such as the Milk in Schools scheme, school meals, and orange juice allotments starting closing the nutrient gap between rich and poor—a trend that would still be in effect in 1980.⁵⁸ Hollingsworth concludes by stating that the economic constraints placed on foodstuffs from the inter-war years onward had a leveling effect: no longer was one's social

standing a fairly reliable indicator of health.⁵⁹

Lord Woolton continued to consult with and be influenced by nutritionists during his tenure at the MoF. Indeed, it was this relationship with the scientific community that gave rise to the MoF published recipe booklets, which included recipes such as the “National Loaf” and

⁵⁸ Dorothy Hollingsworth, “Rationing and Economic Constraints on Food Consumption in Britain since the Second World War.” (*World Review of Nutrition and Dietetics* 42, 1983), 217.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 192.

“Woolton Pie;” however, these were created with an eye towards nutritional content and ingredient availability, rather than flavor profiles, and, while they were universally eaten, they may not have been universally loved. One critic goes so far as to describe the eponymous pie thusly: “[...] a dish made up out of carrots, parsnips, turnips and potatoes, covered with a most curious sauce.”⁶⁰ Consuming mass quantities of starchy foods was encouraged by the MoF as a way to make rationed foods (such as butter and meat) “go farther” as well as being part of a healthy diet, for “[...] eating wisely for health was part of defeating Hitler.”⁶¹

The National Loaf was one of the “great fillers”⁶² advocated by Woolton; introduced in April 1942, it consisted of a blend of fortified, wholemeal flours and chalk to bolster calcium intake and was universally reviled—one woman, writing to Woolton to complain, referred to it as “this nasty, dirty, dark, coarse, indigestible bread.”⁶³ However, consumption of the bread averaged 4 pounds per week per person; in a survey done in 1944, “roughly half disliked it or accepted it as a consequence of the war.”⁶⁴

World War II food rationing had begun in January of 1940, and as in WWI, food equity was achieved through a combination of ration points and price controls, administered through the MoF. Color-coded ration books containing coupons were issued to every home: buff colored for adults, blue for children between the ages of 5-16, and green for pregnant women and children under five. Once in possession of a ration book and registered with both a greengrocer and

⁶⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁶¹ Spencer, 315.

⁶² Longmate, 154.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Oddy, 140.

butcher, people could obtain their rations. From the outset, children were entitled to extra foods considered essential for growth, such as milk, orange juice, and cod liver oil. The National Milk Scheme was introduced in July 1940, and provided free or subsidized milk to expectant mothers and young children.⁶⁵

Other foodstuffs, such as potatoes, coffee, bread, vegetables, fruit, and fish were not rationed at the outset of the war, although they quickly became difficult to obtain. Canned (tinned) goods were also un-rationed, however, this also meant that richer people could simply buy up supplies when they were available, leaving the average family out of luck. This problem was eliminated for the most part with the points value scheme, which controlled prices and inventory; should the supplies on any one item run low, the MoF could raise the points value, thereby assuring a steady supply of items without shortages.⁶⁶ The points scheme soon inspired a following amongst homemakers, who, according to Longmate, took “deep satisfaction” in discovering “points bargains,” and they “turned to the list of ‘Change in Points Value’ in the newspaper with all the zeal of a gambler looking for the racing results.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Longmate, 142.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 142.

Foodstuff	Weekly Allotment
Bacon	4 oz
Butcher's Meat (uncooked)	1s.2d
Butter	2 oz
Cheese	4 oz
Jam	4 oz
Lard	4 oz
Margarine	2 oz
Sugar	12 oz
Tea	2 oz
Mincemeat	4 oz
Honey	4 oz
Egg (fresh)	1 for adults, 3 for children
Egg (dried)	3
Milk	7 pints (for children)
Dried Milk	1 pint

Figure 7. Foodstuffs rationed during WWII. Source: Spencer, *British Food*, 318.

Rationing and Morale

Rationing was the key to keeping morale high during WWII, as explained by Mackay: “It was held [by the ministers] to be imperative for the morale of the nation that its will to work for victory was not undermined by having too little to eat, whether through shortage of food supplies or their high cost.”⁶⁸ A sense of equity also contributed to the public’s high morale; Woolton embodied this sense of fairness as evidenced by the placard hung over the staff entrance at the MoF: “We not only cope, we care.”⁶⁹

Anecdotal evidence also demonstrates the acceptance of the rationing program and its correlation with morale—a housewife from Dorchester, when asked about the MoF and her

⁶⁸ Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 196.

⁶⁹ Longmate, 154.

opinion of Woolton, replied, “Lord Woolton was always so sympathetic and if he could not give us more butter he added an extra ounce to the margarine. We all trusted and loved him.”⁷⁰

Perhaps not all civilians trusted and loved Lord Woolton, but for the majority of the public, who were doing their bit, he symbolized the equity that was needed to support the Home Front.

Mackay further explains the effectiveness of morale in light of important food controls: “Another area the government could intervene positively to sustain popular morale was the supply and distribution of food and essential goods.”⁷¹ However, rather than lauding Lord Woolton, Mackay has another hero in mind: Beveridge. Mackay demonstrates how the Beveridge report solidified the public’s opinion about the welfare state, as evidenced by an accounting of individuals’ reactions to the Beveridge report in 1942. For example, one woman,

when asked about her opinion, stated “[...] talking of giving us a welfare state where there would be no poverty, no-one starving, and free health care, it just seemed the sort of world we were all looking for.”⁷²

In 2002, Mackay also wrote *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War*, a reactionary text to what he defines as revisionist history

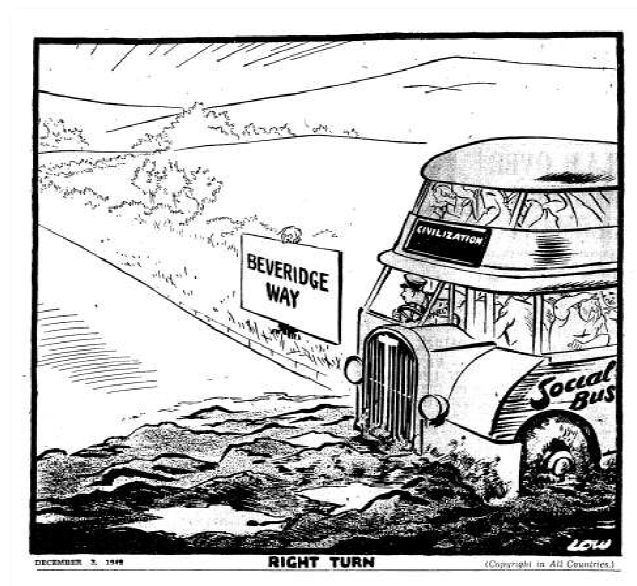


Figure 8. David Low, *Beveridge Way*. <http://cartoons.ac.uk>

⁷⁰ Ibid., 155.

⁷¹ Mackay, *The Test of War*, 155.

⁷² Ibid., 196.

surrounding the subject of civilian morale during World War II. He argues, and thoroughly documents with a mixture of primary and secondary sources, that British civilians did indeed maintain good morale throughout the war, and it was brought about primarily through the efforts of the British government. For example, he claims “[in 1943] the food situation was perceived to be improving after rationing reached its fullest extent and that the Government was winning the battle to get food off the list of morale depressants,”⁷³ and relates one woman’s experience in the food queues:

Every day I used to meet my sisters in town and we would join the queues when a few oranges, fish—in fact, when anything that was unrationed was for sale. Oh, the laughs we used to have listening to the conversations of the people! The things some of them would have loved to do to Hitler and his gang...In spite of our fears, we could always have a good laugh.⁷⁴

Detractors, he writes, would have one believe that all civilians were engaged in black market shenanigans or cheating on their rations, but in fact the opposite was true. Citing sources such as civilian diaries and letters as well as copious amounts of governmental documents, Mackay makes a compelling argument while avoiding over the top patriotism; instead, the reader is given the opportunity to learn about morale from the citizens themselves, providing a fresh insight into the subject.

Perhaps the best example of the parity brought about by government intervention in food controls and their effect on morale is how they dealt with the issue of restaurants. Wealthy citizens had long circumvented the hardships of rationing by eating out; in June 1942 this was to end with the implementation of restaurant price controls. A maximum charge of five shillings per meal was imposed, which, Mackay explains, “meant that the restaurants could not buy on the

⁷³ Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle*, 111.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

black market and expect to remain in profit.”⁷⁵ Communal Feeding Centres, or British Restaurants, as they were known, were “established by local authorities in school and church halls, serving inexpensive three-course meals and no coupons,”⁷⁶ and were very popular—long queues formed for “cottage or fish pie, corned beef and beetroot, sponge with custard—food that kept the workforce going and bonded communities.”⁷⁷ Additionally, the public’s perception of the government’s actions on this matter led many to believe that indeed there was equality, and perhaps the most obvious example of that concept are ration books, which “stood symbolically for the communal in everyone’s day-to-day experience of the war.”⁷⁸

Post-War

World War II ended in 1945, but destroyed infrastructures and devastated economies meant that rationing was far from over. To every Briton’s lament, the end of war did not create a return to a pre-war kitchen; indeed, the situation appeared to worsen as potatoes, flour, and even the National Loaf were rationed for the first time in 1947. The situation was so dire that during the 1948 London Olympics, Parliament encouraged foreign teams to “bring their own food with them.”⁷⁹ Food controls would not begin to lessen until 1950, and then only incrementally; milk was first to be liberated, followed by the end of points controls in restaurants. In the autumn of

⁷⁵ Robert Mackay, *The Test of War: Inside Britain, 1939-45* (London; Philadelphia, PA: UCL Press, 1999), 155.

⁷⁶ Colquhoun, 342.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Mackay, 156.

⁷⁹ Colquhoun, 344.

1953, flour, eggs, and soap were un-rationed, and a historically-significant era officially ended on June 30, 1954, when fats, including meat, cheese, and butter, were taken “off the ration.”⁸⁰

Conclusion

British civilians did indeed maintain good morale throughout the wars of the twentieth century, and it was brought about in good part through the efforts of the British government in the form of food controls that led to an increased sense of equity and measurable improvements in health for many citizens. As Spencer explains, “Child mortality rates had never been so low, fewer mothers had died in childbirth, fewer babies had been still born, [and] children were taller and sturdier; this was a reflection of their daily milk ration.”⁸¹

David Lloyd George, Sir William Beveridge, and Lord Woolton are three of the numerous British bureaucrats and civilians who worked diligently and admirably on the Home Front, and their notable efforts forever changed British society. Lloyd George’s People’s Budget set the stage for public acceptance of Beveridge’s eponymous report, which promised post-war equity with the rise of the welfare state, and Woolton’s recognition of food’s importance to the Home Front led to unprecedented efforts to educate consumers about nutrition. Despite facing political opposition from some quarters, these three men were committed to their causes and achieved remarkable results. Through their efforts, it is apparent that food rationing and controls served a double purpose: to sustain civilian morale as part of the Home Front war effort and as a precursor for Welfare state policies aimed at a more equitable, and, quite literally, healthier society.

⁸⁰ Charman

⁸¹ Spencer, 317.

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